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ABSTRACT

The newsletter issue offers parents suggestions for managing the special child's behavior during infancy, toddlerhood, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence. For each stage, typical behavior is described and suggestions are phrased as "do's and don'ts." Guidance for dealing with problems includes having a professional evaluation of adaptive behavior levels performed and using the resulting developmental stage rather than chronological age as the guide to behavior. (DB)

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Special Parent ★Special Child

Practical pointers for parenting handicapped children

VOL. 5, NO. 3 MAY/JUNE 1989

MANAGING YOUR SPECIAL CHILD'S BEHAVIOR BY AGES AND STAGES

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Special parents are frequently upset by problem behavior in their special child. Often parents are willing to tolerate unacceptable behavior because they feel sorry or guilty over their child's plight. Some parents are convinced that children with disabilities are incapable of acquiring acceptable standards of behavior, while others have unrealistic expectations of what their special child can and cannot do.

Behavior develops stage by stage in **all** children, normal or otherwise. Just as children's bodies grow and develop over a period of time, so does their gradual awareness of what kinds of behavior are considered acceptable. This increase in self control includes an understanding of the meaning of "no," the ability to curb the desire to do as one pleases, comprehend the relationship between cause and effect and, ultimately, differentiate wrong from right. What is characteristic of many special children, however, is their **uneven** rate of development; this becomes increasingly apparent when their behavior does not match their chronological age. As one mother commented ruefully, "My ten-year-old never got over the terrible twos." The key to helping special youngsters acquire good behavior is to determine the actual age at which the child is functioning, irrespective of his chronological age, and to adjust expectations and strategies to that level.

In this issue we will examine at what age certain behaviors develop, what are reasonable expectations at the various ages and stages along with some suggestions that will foster more age-appropriate behavior in your special child.

The infant years

Just as children must crawl before they walk, babble before they talk, so does behavior develop bit by bit.

Infants 0-3 months are at the helpless stage and have no behaviors that warrant discipline. Their needs are physiological and the food, comfort and nurture provided by care givers are generally sufficient. At this tender age infants react positively to comfort and negatively to pain-producing events—wet diaper, hunger, etc.

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Linda Murphy, M.S., is the founder and for the past 15 years has been the director of a widely known, approved school for mentally handicapped children serving children ages 5-21 in Westchester County, NY, and surrounding areas. A lecturer, teacher and administrator, she is a foster parent and the parent of a handicapped child, too.

Suzanne Della Corte, M.S., for 15 Years co-director of the school, is responsible for curricula, staff development and supervision. She is author of numerous research projects in the field and has edited psychology textbooks for a leading New York publisher.

Infants whose needs are met when necessary are learning that they can make an impact on their environment. When this environment is calm, consistent and loving, babies for the most part react positively. Fussy babies are usually reacting to internal factors or immaturities that generally subside with time. There is little parents can do except create an environment that will not frustrate a difficult baby. It's important for parents to realize they should not lay blame, and to ask for support such as baby sitting.

Between 3 and 6 months infants are more alert and can be distracted. They recognize parents, smile and reach for rattles and toys. Babies at this stage are not expected to comply with commands, nor can they be expected to resist temptation. Behaviors at this stage are exploratory—reaching for objects, placing things in his mouth, sucking at fingers, pulling at people's hair are the ways the baby seeks through his senses an understanding of his environment.

By age 12 months the baby's physical growth has developed by leaps and bounds and he can now really explore the world. He can pull himself to a standing position and take first steps. The year-old soon discovers the joys of investigating cabinets and shelves and takes pleasure in touching, pulling and knocking things over. Babies at this stage have no judgment, do not recognize dangers of any kind and are fearless. Adults who continually shout "no" or who spank are only frustrating themselves since the year-old lacks the sophistication to recognize this as discipline.

By 18 months babies have discovered the word "no" themselves and use it endlessly. Their boundless energy gets them into everything. Adults who give chase are indulging baby in a favorite game because, as hard as this may seem, babies at this stage still cannot determine right from wrong.

DO'S AND DON'TS:

Do respond to your infant's demands. The trend today favors the idea that it is impossible to spoil an infant. A crying baby is signaling that he needs help. Holding, feeding, rocking or soothing the crying baby softens his frustrations and accustoms him to the fact that help is forthcoming. When baby realizes his environment is dependable he more readily accepts delay in his immediate gratification.

Do talk to your infant continuously. Keep your language simple and the tone of your voice modulated. Your voice is reassuring and stimulates your baby to interact with you. Gradually, as the infant develops he becomes able to understand your comments and the directions you are giving him.

Do verbalize your baby's feelings for him. Saying, for example, to your crying baby, "You're hungry and it hurts your tummy, I know. I'm warming your food," or, "You are mad because you dropped your toy and can't get it" helps him by acknowledging his needs. This also increases the likelihood of him listening to what you

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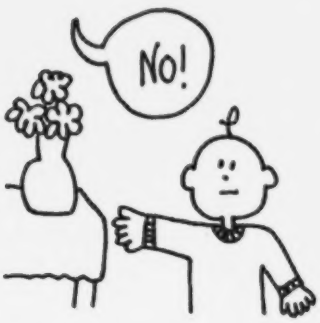
are saying and later on following your directions.

Do use distractions as much as possible. Babies are remarkably easy to entertain and when headed for trouble can be diverted to a more appropriate activity. Yelling, reprimanding or spanking at this stage will only get the baby into the habit of seeking negative attention.

Do remove temptation. Change the environment so that it reduces the chance of dangerous exploration. Removing sharp objects, installing door latches or gates are better methods than chasing after the child endlessly.

The "toddler twos"



More has been written about this perplexing stage than any other. Child development experts commiserate with the parent faced with the active toddler who knows no fears, has no judgment, whose impulse control is minimal and whose emerging personality is generally negative and egocentric. The toddler is usually demanding, persists in doing everything the same way, insisting on the same story or game at the same time each day. Toddler two mood swings are legendary and tantrums can become frequent.

DO'S AND DON'TS:

Do avoid situations where your toddler can respond with "no." Instead of saying, "Do you want lunch now?" state, "Lunch is ready and your favorite drink is already poured."

Do modify your home so it is as safe as possible. This may include special latches for medicine cabinets, protective covers for electric outlets. This not only protects your toddler but it diminishes time spent in negative confrontations with him as well.

Do help your toddler to understand there are consequences for his behavior. When he misuses or throws toys, for example, remove them for a short period of time. If he persists, continue in their removal. Suggest to him ways to play more appropriately.

Do remember that toddlers are unable to amuse themselves for any length of time and will need your intervention, suggestions and supervision to play.

Do keep activities of any kind short in duration. Toddlers are extremely restless and their short attention span requires frequent activity changes in order to keep them interested and diverted.

Do provide the toddler with advance notice because, even though they are restless, their contradictory behavior makes them resist changing gears. Say, for example, "Right after we finish eating, we will go upstairs to take a bath."

Don't give choices. A toddler is inherently incapable of making decisions. Asking him, for example, if he wants a bath now or later will produce the one thing he is capable of which is usually a negative—"Don't want to." Give him practice making choices when the choice is presented directly and immediately. For example, "Here are your red and blue shirts. Pick one to put on."

Do use humor and imagination when giving directions. Instead of confronting him with the direct command of "Put your toys away now," make a game out of it. Say, for example, "Let's put the farm toys in the barn and the little cars back in the box." Actively partici-

pate in putting away his possessions with him until he catches on.

Do ignore your toddler when he tantrums as long as he is not in any danger of harming himself. Walk away after explaining that you will pay attention to him when there are no more tears.

Don't burden your toddler with complicated language or expect him to understand events that happen in the future. Concepts of "soon," "next week" or "later" are meaningless. Toddlers live in the here and now and anticipate that what is mentioned will be acted upon immediately.

Do try to interpret his feelings of frustration for him in ways he can understand. The toddler who tantrums because he doesn't want to leave the playground doesn't understand that he can return tomorrow. Calmly pick him up and carry him out if necessary, saying, "You are angry because you want to stay and play. Playtime is over. We are going home to have a story."

Do realize that the toddler thinks in terms of "I, me, mine" and that this colors every activity and endeavor. He resists sharing his toys and possessions since he perceives this as a loss, and cannot tolerate it when his mother's attention is turned elsewhere. His play is usually side-by-side as he is unable to interact or give and take with others. Forcing him to behave otherwise at this stage in his development is not productive. It's best to make sure that playmates and siblings are provided with equal portions of snacks, toys and the like and that play periods with others are kept short.

Do become aware that the toddler's tantrums diminish as his language becomes more complex and his ability to grasp concepts increases. The child who is able to communicate his wants and needs does not frustrate as easily. His growing ability to understand the abstractions connected with the passing of time such as "later on" or "tomorrow" means he is bettter able to wait for things. The knowledge that events occur or reoccur is also a sign of more mature thinking.

Do remember that if your child hasn't reached the stage where he is able to grasp these concepts, you are going to have to treat him as if he were a much younger child. It's better to adjust your handling techniques than to thwart him unnecessarily.

Pre-school: ages 3-5

This exciting period is one of exploration and information gathering. The three-to-five-year old is much more social, inquisitive and compliant than the toddler. Even so, mood swings can be evident and episodes of whining are commonplace. The three-year-old often prefers Mommy over Daddy, considering Daddy as his rival.

During the pre-school years the child begins to develop a sense of fairness, becomes less self-centered, develops a better understanding of sharing and begins to grasp the concepts of right and wrong. He also starts to understand that behavior has consequences. Now is the time when parents can comfortably offer rational explanations as to why events occur or why they don't. The child whose mind has developed in sequential fashion will be able to accept such explanation. Parents can help the child through these formative years by building

up his self-esteem. Rewarding your youngster with verbal praise for accomplishing simple chores that have been built into his routine is one way of doing this.

DO'S AND DONT'S:

Do be aware that pre-schoolers are easily side tracked. They are very apt to go off on tangents rather than pursue a task to completion. Pre-schoolers need extra time; they mull things over and day dream. This should be looked upon as a creative activity and if extra time is allotted, neither parent or child will feel pressured.

Do note also that pre-schoolers still cannot shift gears easily. Give plenty of advance notice of changes in events or scheduled activities.

Do accept your child's feelings but supervise his actions. A pre-schooler's emotions are apt to run freely, but just because he gets angry at someone does not give him license to hit, bully or take possessions from others. This can be explained to him by saying, "It's OK to get angry or to have mad feelings. It's not OK to turn that anger into hitting."

Do allow your child to label or express his feelings. The pre-schooler with his emerging personality needs your help in identifying his emotions. Listen carefully, acknowledge the importance of what he is telling you with a brief "I see" or "Hmm." Act as his interpreter by paraphrasing him or making comments such as, "That made you sad, you felt like you were crying inside."

Do offer alternatives rather than reprimands. Children tend to ignore negatives, but will respond to an alternative activity with good grace and interest. Set up a game that everyone enjoys rather than shouting "Stop!" when they don't play well together or otherwise misbehave.

Grade school years

School age children begin to develop logical thinking and an appreciation of why things are the way they are. Their awareness of right and wrong becomes more acute, along with an acceptance of rules and regulations. Playing games and getting along with peers is all-important. Often there is a fascination with rituals and youngsters of this age—especially boys—group themselves into secret clubs and organizations. Becoming one of the gang, even when the game is not a favorite, reflects a growing maturity and acceptance of others.

Most school age children by now thoroughly understand the passage of time and can quickly grasp the relevance of "next week" or "next month." They accept delays or changes in schedule much more readily.

These are the years when parents can increase the types and kinds of chores or responsibilities, such as delivering newspapers or raking leaves. At this age youngsters can acquire a fuller understanding of contractual obligations. Unfulfilled responsibilities such as not delivering the newspapers on time or not feeding the dog should have consistent consequences that have been agreed upon beforehand.

DO'S AND DON'TS:

Do remember that discipline actually means teaching, not punishment. Discipline should be fair, even-handed and the terms agreed

upon beforehand. Arbitrarily grounding your youngster for a month for coming home late for supper is too extreme. Give advance notice that one day's grounding is the consequence for such behavior, with more extreme consequences for more serious behaviors. Make sure you carry through.

Do not expect total compliance immediately. The grade school child is more autonomous and his obedience develops gradually as he internalizes the cause and effect of his behavior.

Do stick to what you say. A firm, fair, consistent policy works best. The child knows he can count on you and generally takes comfort from your supervision and limit-setting even though he's apt to protest to the contrary.

Do make sure you and your spouse agree on discipline methods. A united front works best and prevents the child from playing one parent against the other.

Do make sure you are not overburdening your school age child. Expecting him to take over the responsibilities of babysitting younger siblings, food preparation or other housekeeping chores robs your child of normal childhood experiences and plunges him into the adult world too soon.

Do remember to praise him for good behavior. Your child needs verbal praise and recognition when he is behaving acceptably and tangible rewards such as an allowance for chores well done.

The older child

The adolescent by definition is apt to be moody. Teenage mood swings and unpredictability often mirror the tantrums of the teribble twos. Peer pressures and friendships are more important than family responsibilities. The older child is preoccupied with his looks and the problems of dressing, dating and male-female relationships take precedence. The teenager is generally concerned with his future, is alternately boastful and fearful, takes courage from his peer group, yet strives mightily for independence. There is usually enormous conflict with parental wishes and often there is open rebellion. The wisest course for a parent is to provide the older child with the background to make sound decisions. This includes providing guidelines on sex education, dating behaviors, drug and substance abuse. Overprotection is unwise because it renders the child vulnerable to unethical outside influences and peer pressures.

DO'S AND DON'TS:

Do help your child withstand peer pressure by giving him guidelines and good excuses such as "I can't do that, my parents will ground me for a month" or "I can't drink, it doesn't mix with my allergies."

Do set clear guidelines for acceptable social behavior. Make sure your older child knows exactly what is acceptable and what is not condoned. This includes attitudes towards the opposite sex, personal property, telling the truth.

Do set the same guidleines for yourself. Older children are quick to sense adult hypocrisy and react conversely to "Do as I say, not as I do" practices. If you expect your adolescent to become lawful, truthful and upstanding, he needs

to model himself on adults who pay their bills, respect obligations, don't lie, cheat or drink to excess, for example.

Do become a good role model. Control your own angry outbursts. This allows your adolescent to observe that self control gives family life a measure of calmness and security.

Dealing with problems

The special child does not conform to the development of appropriate behaviors in the exact sequence that has been outlined above. Special children develop at a slower or uneven pace and, even when they have developed a certain level of behavior, their performance can fluctuate from day to day.

Here's how to help:

- Try to approximate at what stage your child is functioning. If you are uncertain, seek help from your child's teacher or other professionals.
- Tests called **adaptive behavior tests** administered by teachers and psychologists can provide information on what level or at what stage your child is functioning.
- **Use the stage your child is at and not his chronological age** to guide you in what you can expect in the way of behaviors from your special youngster.
- Select the techniques that are closest to your child's level of functioning, if you wish to modify his behavior. For example, if your child, although chronologically ten years old, is still impulsive and unaware of common hazards, it is unrealistic for you to allow him to play outside unsupervised. By the same token you wouldn't expect a pre-schooler to have the attention span to sit through a lengthy dinner. If your special child has the characteristics of a pre-schooler, even though he is much older, you will have to adjust your expectations.
- Ask yourself how much your child is able to understand what you say to him. Is he able to comply with complex two or three step comments? Can he tell the difference between such abstractions as "later on," "the day after"? Does he know the difference between right or wrong; does he understand good or bad? Sometimes efforts to modify behavior when it is based on complicated verbal explanations or abstract appeals to reason only serves to confuse, or results in endless confrontation when your child is not up to that level.
- Ask the parents of other special youngsters for any hints. Perhaps this is a good topic for parent meetings.
- Remember that your special child is going to require tangible forms of praise as reinforcement for good behavior. This includes getting eye contact, nodding your approval, smiling, expanding your commentary to include statements such as "I like the way you are so helpful."
- Remember that your special child responds to the tone of your voice even if he can't understand.
- Physical signs of approval, a reassuring pat or touch, are often necessary as external reminders.
- The social skills and behaviors that children absorb on their own through their contact with playmates and the community must be **taught** to the special needs child. This takes much repetition of time and energy but is well worth the effort.

PSYCHOLOGIST'S CORNER:

Developmental milestones and lags—what does it all mean?

by George Popper, Ph. D.

When psychologists or other health care professionals tell parents of special children that their child has a "delay" or a developmental lag, they have something very special in mind.

Human beings develop physically, emotionally, academically and socially following a predictable schedule of events. By a certain age a child is expected to sit up, walk, run, talk, reason, interact with other children, read, etc. **Developmental milestones** refer to specific skills that are considered important at a given age; a child's failure to attain these milestones by that age is often seen as an indicator that he may indeed have a significant handicap.

At first, development is primarily biological, involving sensory awareness, muscle development and coordination. The child learns to sit up, follow and then grasp a moving object, localize a sound, talk and walk. But that's not all that is happening—the child is learning to be a social creature as well. As with all developmental skills, the acquisition of various social behaviors follows a predictable pattern. Since they are developmental the implication is that they are more a result of our genes and our biology than anything else.

It is essential to understand that children learn and do new things when they are "developmentally" ready to do so and not before. Trying to toilet train a child before he has attained sphincter muscle control or trying to teach a child how to walk or talk before the child is biologically ready to do those things can be harmful. Ideally, the child's environment should be conducive to growth and development as nature intended. There are many children, however, who, despite all efforts, constantly lag behind their peers. These children are sometimes called **developmentally delayed**, implying that their problems became evident during the time when those skills were supposed to occur.

These skills are typically assessed by psychologists with one or more of the many useful scales developed for that purpose over the years. The **Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale** is often used as part of a psychological or educational assessment of the child or when there is a question regarding possible developmental lag. It is also helpful in ascertaining whether or not a child has progressed or regressed over a period of time.

Since children develop at different rates, often a slight delay is not cause for concern. However, after a child has gone beyond what is considered a reasonable limit (which differs depending on the skill), then some attention to the delay is needed. Ignoring the problem in the hopes that it will eventually disappear on its own is unwise.

On occasion, a child will show an extraordinary ability in one or more areas such as reading or walking or acquire these skills at an early age. At times, there are children who show remarkable growth in one limited area but little or no growth in other developmental areas. The temptation is to look at the one or two well developed areas while ignoring the weak ones. This can be a problem since an uneven pattern of development can indicate more serious problems. It's time to seek help if you notice this in your child's behavior.

Illustrations by Leah Spring